

## **Conducting Oral Histories**

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Oral histories are systematic collections of interviews, audio or video recordings, in which people are asked to recount their experiences of an event, time period, place or person. Following the interviews, the recordings are duplicated, transcribed, and indexed to give access to historians, teachers, interested family members, and students for research purposes. The recordings, along with periphery materials such as duplications of photographs, interview notes, correspondence and ancillary documents are stored according to archival standards.

Typically, one person is recorded at a time and the series of interviews are held in a single collection. Oral histories may be conducted for a number of reasons, such as family heirlooms, to mark the anniversary of a historic event, or simply to record the experience of living in a particular place during a time period when conditions were unique. A few of the wider known national oral history projects include the WPA's ex-slave narratives, and numerous WWII veterans collections. Here in Ohio, you will find oral records on labor history at the Ohio Historical Society and interviews currently being conducted to record citizens of Columbus' memories of the downtown Lazarus department store.

There are a number of problems associated with oral histories as a source for historical scholarships as well as limitations associated with their use as historical record. These issues will be addresses later in this tutorial. However, as a form of documentation oral histories are indispensable, as they allow historians to gain a greater understanding of the individual experience of history and the broader public memory.

### **Part 1: How to Conduct an Oral History**

To a novice, oral histories may seem to simply be the result of sitting down with a video recorder and asking questions of people. This could not be farther from the truth, in fact, conducting an oral history is a very time consuming and, at moments, arduous task. A great deal of work and uncounted hours go into finding and contacting people, arranging meetings, setting up equipment,

researching, and transcribing. In end, the finished product is well worth the time an effort put forth. Each oral history project will be different depending on the availability of material, the abundance and willingness of interviewees, and the number of people participating in the project. Below is an outline of steps taken while conducting an oral history project.

**Identifying Goals & Objectives.** Begin by identifying your research goals, narrowing the scope of your research into obtainable increments will allow you to gather quality and detailed information that will add to existing scholarship. If you try to do too much, chances are that you will end up with vague material that is more easily obtained through other means. For example, if you are conducting an oral history of your family, instead of asking your grandfather to recount his entire life, you may wish to focus on why he decided to move to Ohio and what the area was like when he first arrived. You can talk about other portions of his life in subsequent projects. Before embarking on any project ask yourself what type of information you are looking for, if it is already available, and how an oral history will contribute to the existing material.

**Research.** Preliminary research is essential in preparing for an interview. It is extremely important that you familiarize yourself with the topic as much as possible prior to setting up questions and conducting interviews. Without a comprehensive understanding of the topic you may gloss over important topics or not be able to recognize significant information when it is discussed in the interview. Moreover, it may be helpful to photocopy pictures and other material that could provoke memories of the topic in an interview. Make sure that you have consulted non-verbal sources on the topic. There may not be significant scholarship available, but there will almost certainly be archival sources and public records to consult. Most major research facilities have online access to their collections through indexes and in some cases digitized material, however travel may still be necessary. A relatively complete list of libraries, archives and historical societies in Ohio is available on this site under the "[Historical Resources](#)" link. Be sure to provide yourself with an adequate amount of time to delve into the information and take care to make notations on various sources for future reference. Research notes are an important part of the final interview collection.

**Identifying Interviewees.** Identify people who have the experiences you are looking for and that are willing and able to provide an interview. Where are they? How is their health? Are they willing to discuss the topic on record and have their testimony made available to the general public? There are a number of ways to find people associated with your research topic. For example, while researching the topic you may come across names and consider calling them directly to ask for their participation. Some of the more general and less invasive methods may include taking out advertisements in local newspapers or posting notices at community centers, retirement communities and area churches. Once you interview a few people and gain personal experience as a genuine and

trustworthy researcher, interviewees may be willing to provide you with the names of additional people to interview.

**Developing Questions.** Developing questions is one of the more complex and important steps in preparing for an interview. Your research along with the willingness of the interviewee will guide the general direction of questioning, however, you will need to develop questions that provoke extended and descriptive responses in advance. Questions should be focused but open-ended. In other words, the interviewee should understand exactly what you are asking about but not be able to answer with a simple “yes” or “no.” Rather than asking, “Was the 1968 Kentucky Derby enjoyable?” ask, “What was it like to attend the 1968 Kentucky Derby?” The second question requires the respondent to recall their interpretation of the event and point to aspects particularly important to their experience. Some people prefer to send a complete list of questions to the interviewee prior to the scheduled interview, others do not; it will be up to you and the interviewee to decide how you proceed.

**Interview Preparation.** Minor distractions or mistakes can prove to derail an interview very quickly; therefore preparation should be done with diligence. The best way to prepare is to make a checklist of necessary items and test them prior to the interview. Here is an example checklist:

- Tape or video recorder with a counter
- Extra cassette tapes (preferable 60 minute tapes that are held together with screws)
- External microphone and cord
- Extra batteries
- Extension cords
- Watch
- Camera and film
- Note pad and pens
- Photocopies of photographs that may be used to provoke memories
- [Life history forms](#)
- [Release forms](#)

The location where you will be conducting the interview should be quiet; small noises such as cars passing on the street, air conditioning systems or even the wind can cause distraction or be caught by the tape and distort the recording. Additionally, the location should have comfortable furniture, appropriate lighting and access to restrooms. Finally, try to remove all other people from the room. Often times, excited spouses, children or friends will insist on making corrections or contributing to answers during the interview. Interruptions such as these often distract the interviewee’s thought process, impact their confidence, and/or decrease morale. These negative effects have unfortunate results on the historical record as significant data may be omitted, future researchers may be confused to the additional voices on the tape, and it may impact the relationship

and trust between the interviewer and interviewee. If the spouse, children, and/or friends are persistent in telling their stories, this may be a good opportunity to suggest they contribute their thoughts in a separate interview.

**Conducting the interview.** Since interviews are fluid events, an interviewer needs to invoke a comfortable rapport and be extremely flexible, but also be able to take command when things digress without intimidating or offending the interviewee. Since your primary function is to direct the interview it is necessary to understand the process and your duties within it. First and foremost, you are a listener. Your voice on the tape should be extremely limited and used only to ask questions or encourage the interviewee; non-verbal encouragement is preferred.

You may wish to chat with the interviewee prior to beginning the interview in order to make him/her comfortable. Restate the purpose of your research and how their interview contributes. Show the interviewee the equipment that will be used and alert them to particulars such as speaking into the microphone and how to signal for a break. Finally explain what will happen during and after the interview.

Once you have secured the room from distractions begin recording. Start with light questions to relax the situation and allow the interviewee to become comfortable with the recording equipment. As the questioning progresses you should begin to ask more probing or controversial questions. However, if the interviewee wishes to not discuss the question, respect their request and move on; trying to trick them can quickly dissolve any trust you have instilled and potentially ruin your chances for open and honest answers. If the interviewee does not understand a question, be ready to rephrase it as many times as necessary and provide limited verbal encouragement to extend answers (i.e. "can you talk a little more about that?") or for purposes of clarification (i.e. "what to do mean by that?" or "can you explain what that is?").

Make sure to keep detailed notes during the interview. Keep a running list of topics that you would like to discuss further, note bodily communication and how the interviewee reacts to particular questions, this type of reaction is important and may not be discernable from the recordings.

Do not try to capture the entire interview at once. An hour to ninety minutes is about how long a single session should last. If you try to push any further you run the risk of overwhelming the interviewee. Moreover, once you have had time to review your notes and listen to the recordings you will certainly have new questions; therefore you should expect to return for a follow-up interview. In fact, if the interview goes well you may want to try to schedule a follow-up immediately.

Finally, as you approach your time limit begin to wind down the interview just as you started. End on a couple of easy and light questions; doing so will lower any

lingering tension or anxiety from the difficult discussions and put everyone in a relaxed state. Be sure to collect all paperwork and properly store the equipment. Don't forget to thank the interviewee, remind them of any further obligations on their part, and describe what will happen next.

## **Part 2: The Post Interview Process**

**Transcription.** Transcribing interviews is probably the most laborious and time-consuming part of the oral history process. A general rule of thumb is that it takes eight hours to transcribe every one hour of recording. While tedious, transcription is a relatively simple process; you listen to the recording while typing the words into a document.

The first step in transcribing an interview is to make a duplicate of the original recording. Constant stopping and rewinding involved in transcription has the potential to cause damage to magnetic tape. Once your duplicate copy is ready you can begin to move forward. The easiest way to proceed is to use a cassette player with headphones and type into a PC. You should feel free to leave out miscellaneous sounds and speech patterns, such as "um" or "uh-huh," that do not contribute to the content or relevance of the testimony. Be sure to include any unusual sounds or reactions that indicate emotion. Bracket comments that are not discernable from the tape such as breaks, long pauses in the conversation or indistinguishable words or phrases. After you complete the text, review the transcription for errors by reading along as the tape plays.

Next you will need to create an index. Basically, an index is a list of topics covered in the interview and the location of the discussion in the transcripts and the recording. The index can be extremely detailed or fairly basic depending on the length and topic of the interview. Typical indexes will note topic changes and significant subtopics. Along with an index, it is also recommended that you keep a record of time in the left margin of the transcript. To do this, note the running hour and minute in an incremental fashion. For example, mark the length of time the recording has been playing next to the line of text that is being spoken every 10 minutes. When 10 minutes have passed on the first tape, write "Tape 1, 00:10:00" in the left margin, after 20 minutes write "00:20:00", and so on until you have reached the end of the tape. Counters on tape recorders are not reliable and often vary for unit to unit, therefore it is more useful to record the tape position by the time on a clock. This will allow the reader to cross-reference the page number and time of the transcripts and recordings. An index and time record can usually be completed within a single listening, however, if the interview is complex you may have to complete multiple reviews.

Once you have completed transcribing the recordings, send the transcripts to the interviewee. Be sure to notify the person that this will be the last opportunity to correct any errors or add clarification. Once you receive the corrections, add them to the official transcript in an obvious font so that it is clear the corrections

were added after the recorded interview took place. In some cases you may encounter an interviewee who has changed their mind about the interview and would like it to be returned or destroyed. The ethics surrounding this dilemma are unclear. If the interviewee has already signed a form relinquishing rights to the interview, you do not have to abide by their wishes. However, not doing so may have an adverse affect on the remainder of the project. Essentially, it is up to you on how to proceed.

**Storage.** Before you begin storing your interviews, consider donating the work to a local historical society or library/archive. Institutions such as these are interested in local history and biography and may accept your work as a donation, thus contributing to their collection and saving you money on storage and supplies cost. Historical societies and archives will take care to properly store, maintain, and make your research available to the public.

If, however, you choose to store your research for personal or family use, consider the following:

- Organize your research notes and supplementary material by interview and subdivide by topic and type of material (i.e. photographs, manuscripts, bound material and objects).
- Store your research notes, transcripts and recordings in acid-free archival boxes, placing the divided material in appropriate containers. Objects may need to be wrapped in tissue paper and placed within their own box, while documents may be able to be divided into separate folders within a single box. Supplies are available online at [Gaylord](#) and [Light Impressions](#).
- Create a finding aid. A finding aid is essentially an introduction to interviews with a rationale for the collection's creation, background history on the topic and/or person, notes on the organization of the collection and an index of the interviews, notes, and supplementary material within the collection.
- Finally, try to use duplicate copies of the recordings, transcriptions, unique documents and photographs for research while keeping the originals stored in a safe location that reasonably fits with acceptable guidelines for light, temperature and humidity levels. For more information on these guidelines visit the Canadian Conservation Institute's [Preserving My Heritage](#) web site.

### **Part 3: Issues of Accuracy and Reliability**

Several issues surround the use of oral history as an accurate and reliable source for scholarship. A limited list includes:

- Deterioration or failure in memory
- Personal bias (political, social, racial or religious)
- Reinterpretation of events
- Trick or confusing questions that illicit an intended response
- Emotional or familial relationships between interviewer and interviewee
- Difficulties in transcribing emotions and voice inflection

These issues certainly pose problems that are not easily overcome while conducting or researching oral histories; some are simply inherent in the medium. However, these concerns should not disqualify oral history as a source for historical interpretation. The same issues exist in many written and photographic sources such as newspaper articles, scrapbooks, letters, diaries and journals. When these documents are created, memories were sifted through a similar barrage of emotions to create the expressions recorded on those pages.

In order to overcome problems with accuracy and reliability, researchers must understand the nature of public memory and oral history. Interviews do not record the past or history as it happened; rather, they document how an individual, having experienced an event first-hand, currently interprets their memory of it. Each though has been filtered through years of further experience, each image is seen through the eyes that have been witness to decades of life, and each word is being spoke by a mouth that has been retrained to communicate differently as time passed. Knowing that oral histories are recollections of the past rather than eyewitness accounts allow us to proceed with thoughtfulness and use additional source material to reinforce statements.

Oral histories should add to our historical knowledge. If there is little or no additional information available, an oral history can only claim to interpret the interviewee's interpretation. If used in conjunction with additional interviews, archival and physical evidence, oral histories can supply us with a fuller and richer view of history as it was experienced by the broader society.